
Why are we pretending we would fight for Georgia?

By Geoffrey Wheatcroft
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Messrs Miliband and Cameron want Georgia to join Nato. Such thinking is muddled, dangerous and defies the lessons of history

Hard on the heels of Nicolas Sarkozy and Condoleezza Rice, and keen to share their limelight, David Cameron arrived in Tbilisi yesterday. His visit is a reward to the Leader of the Opposition for having expressed even more bellicose views on the Georgian crisis than the Americans, which should sound loud alarm bells for those of us who may quite soon be living under a Tory government.

In the official view of Washington, the expansion of Nato up to the borders of Russia was a benevolent spreading of democracy. "It is the right of the Georgian people and Georgian government to determine their own security orientation," says Kurt Volker, principal deputy assistant secretary of state, and Matthew Bryza, the American special envoy, adds that Russia would not have attacked Georgia if she had already belonged to Nato.

While Gordon Brown and David Miliband merely mouthed empty platitudes about the crisis (although Miliband has been sympathetic to Georgia's Nato aspirations in the past), Cameron went startlingly further when he said that its membership of Nato should be accelerated. His words so excited the Georgians that they asked him to meet their ambassador in London on Wednesday, and then fly out for his Caucasian photo-op.

No doubt this crisis has illustrated Russian ruthlessness and brutality, but then, as the Chechens might say, we knew that already. It has also exposed the severe limits of US power. Although George Bush, Dick Cheney and sabre-rattling pundits have screeched defiance at Russia, they are bereft of any practical response. Removing the Winter Olympics from Sochi doesn't sound like the ultimate deterrent.

But above all, the crisis has highlighted the incoherence of Western policy since the Cold War ended and belatedly raised the question of just what purpose Nato now serves. This is something an intelligent opposition should be discussing.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was created in 1949 as a "one for all and all for one" mutual defence alliance between west European countries, of which Great Britain was then militarily much the most important, and the United States, guarding Europe against Soviet aggression. By the terms of the treaty, "an armed attack on any member in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and ... if such an armed attack occurs, each of them ... will assist the party or parties so attacked by taking forthwith... such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

That object met with total success. Forty years later, the Berlin Wall fell, Soviet Russia began to implode, and its empire soon fell apart. This left Nato without an obvious role, and it might logically have been wound up. Instead, it evolved, almost without anyone's noticing, into an arm of US policy and an outlet for Tony Blair's zealous "humanitarian interventionism".

In the spring of 1999, he mawkishly extolled Nato's bombing of Serbia: "No one in the West who has seen what is happening in Kosovo can doubt that

Nato's military action is justified... [You need only ask] anyone who has seen the tear-stained faces of the hundreds of thousands of refugees streaming across the border, heard their heart-rending tales of cruelty."

But even if Blair had been correct to say that misrule in distant countries justified armed intervention "an alarmingly open-ended principle which has since helped take us into the Iraq disaster " what had it to do with Nato?

How did those tear-stained faces become "an armed attack on any member"? And by what geographical conjuring trick did Afghanistan, more recently, become part of "the North Atlantic area" to require a Nato operation there?

Before then the acutely dangerous policy of enlarging Nato had already begun, partly for the most frivolous of reasons. Bill Clinton ingratiatingly promised a Polish-American audience in Chicago that Poland would join, yet another example of the baleful influence of "hyphenated" American domestic politics on foreign policy.

And so, in this heedless way, Nato was expanded to include not only the former Warsaw Pact countries Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, but the Baltic states that were part of the Soviet Union only 20 years ago. One didn't have to be a Russian nationalist to see this as deliberate provocation of an angry and wounded country. With all its brutality, Russia has legitimate security concerns and national interests. When Georgian membership of Nato is flaunted, one wonders what the US reaction would have been if Leonid Brezhnev had invited Mexico to join the Warsaw Pact. Russian policy may sometimes have a paranoid tinge but, as the saying goes, paranoiacs have enemies, too.

No one stopped to point out that, if the fundamental Nato principle applied, an irredentist border dispute between Latvia and Russia should have become an armed conflict fought by Nato, which was plainly absurd. Bryza's claim that Russia would have been deterred if Georgia had already belonged to Nato is mercifully theoretical but highly questionable. And does Cameron really want what's left of our depleted army sent to the Caucasus to fight Russia?

It remained for a former Tory foreign secretary to dash a little cold water of sanity on these overheated effusions. On Friday Sir Malcolm Rifkind chided the folly of making threats about the use of force when these are obviously not going to be carried out. And the day before he had said, "I think people in both the United States and in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in western Europe will have to ask very clearly how important is Georgia to them.

"There was a lot of talk about how Georgia should join Nato and if only Georgia was a member of Nato this wouldn't have happened, and so forth. I think that is frankly totally unconvincing." The truth is surely as Sir Malcolm says: "The United States, Britain, France and Germany are not going to go to war with Russia over South Ossetia, however sympathetic to the people of Georgia we are.

"We are sympathetic to Tibet, we are sympathetic to Zimbabwe, but we don't contemplate military solutions to these problems. So Nato membership is not the answer." Is it too late for our politicians to learn again that kind of plain speaking and common sense?
